DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 325 765 CG 022 918

AUTHOR Stone, Martha
TITLE The Effects of the Changing Family Experience on Children and Adolescents and a Structured Group Counseling Model for Adolescents in the School Setting.
PUB DATE 8 Dec 88
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Divorce; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotional Adjustment; Emotional Problems; Family Problems; *Group Counseling; Program Design; School Counseling; School Counselors

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews research on the effects of separation or divorce on children and adolescents, and describes a structured small group counseling program for school counselors working with adolescents from changing families. The stated goals of the group program are as follows: (1) to clarify participants' feelings toward divorce; (2) to help the group members understand that others have similar feelings and concerns; (3) to assist the participants in gaining an accurate awareness of divorce; (4) to aid group members in coping with their feelings; (5) to facilitate support of each other and sharing of feelings; and (6) to help group members regain confidence through self-disclosure, peer support, and the group leader's empathetic understanding. Discussion topics and activities for each of the program's 10 to 12 weekly 45-minute sessions, each with a particular focus, are described. (TE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED325765

THE EFFECTS OF THE CHANGING FAMILY EXPERIENCE ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AND A STRUCTURED GROUP COUNSELING MODEL FOR ADOLESCENTS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

Comprehensive Exam, Part II
Martha Stone
December 8, 1988

C6022918

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Martha Stone

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In today's world, educators constantly face changing family situations with their accompanying impact on children and adults. The following statistics emphasize the magnitude of the problem. The divorce rate in the United States has risen dramatically in the last decade. Three out of every four divorces occur in families with children. Researchers have estimated that 50% of the children under the age of 18 will spend some of their lives in single-parent families, due primarily to divorce (Moore and Sumner, 1985). The United States Census Bureau has predicted that, by 1990, only one-half of the families in the country will be comprised of natural parents and siblings (Graver and Morse, 1986). Consequently, educators can expect that, in a typical classroom, almost one-half of the children will have experienced a major family change.

The literature over the past ten years has begun to identify the effects of divorce on children. Naturally, the reactions of children vary, but it has been found that divorce is a most stressful and complex mental health crisis for most children, and it is likely to have negative effects on their short-term adjustment (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Drake, 1979).

Although the amount and nature of assistance required for children from changing families differs, children who are affected by divorce need at least some supportive services to help them through this crisis. Separating and divorcing parents often seek counsel for themselves; however, they do not often seek counsel for their children (Snyder, 1985; Moore and Sumner, 1985). While a most effective way to help children and youth understand what is happening to their family is through open family communication, many adults are so caught up in their own problems they are unable or unwilling to be very helpful to their children (Franke, 1983). Therefore, in many situations help and support must come from outside of the family.

Although assistance for children can come from a variety of sources, this author believes that the school setting is the most logical place for help to be provided. School personnel are, in some cases, the only stable people in the child's environment during the critical period of divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that schools provided a structure in children's lives at a time when their families were falling apart. The continuity of attending school daily, being required to perform certain tasks in and out of school, and having routine social contacts can give children some security and assist them in adapting to the divorce. The school can also become a safe environment for interventions during the process of adjustment.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects

of separation/divorce on children and adolescents. A further aim is to examine group counseling as an approach for working with adolescents from changing families and to describe a structured group program for this population.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Divorce situations are very complex and multifaceted; consequently, it is difficult to generalize the specific effects on children. Several authors have indicated that the age and developmental stage of the child at the time of divorce is a crucial factor in determining the consequences of the divorce for that child (Cantrell, 1986; Kurdek, 1983; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The child's reaction also depends on such factors as his/her age, sex, each parent's personality and previous relationship with the child, the child's relationship with siblings, as well as the emotional availability of these important people during the divorce period. The child's personality and his/her strengths and capacities to adjust to stresses, such as separation in the past, are also significant (Freemen and Couchman, 1985; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Studies have shown that children from separating and divorcing families suffer from lower self-esteem than children from intact families (Parish and Dostal, 1980; Rasche and Rasche, 1979). Diminished self-concept has been related to lowered socioeconomic status as a result of the divorce (Parish and Taylor, 1979). It has also been concluded that, because children have a tendency to feel guilty, blame

themselves for the divorce and feel insecure, abandoned and unloved, they suffer from lower self-concepts and loss of identity (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

It is not surprising that children from changing families demonstrate changes in school behavior, academic performance, achievement and attendance patterns (Cantrell, 1986; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Garvin (1984) reports that a study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Kettering Foundation, based on over 8,000 students, indicates that there were more incidences of tardiness, truancies and discipline problems that resulted in expulsion and suspension among one-parent families than among those that had two parents at home.

The most extensive research concerning the impact of family breakdown upon children was conducted by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980). They documented the emotional, behavioral, physical and school-related responses of children to divorce. As a result of their five-year, longitudinal study of 131 children and their families, they identified a common range of feelings and concerns for young children, school-aged children and adolescents. The central themes they found were fear, sadness, worry, rejection, loneliness, conflicted loyalties and anger. These themes appeared in varying degrees in their play and behavior.

They found that, for all children, the divorce experience was frightening. Children became concerned about who would take care of them and were confused about their future

relationships with their parents. Children's reaction to divorce was often sadness and an enormous sense of loss. The children were openly tearful, moody and pervasively sad. One-third showed symptoms of acute depression, including sleeplessness, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, deep sighing, feelings of emptiness, play inhibition, compulsive overeating and somatic complaints of various kinds. Two-thirds of the children longed for the absent parent. Fantasies of reconciling the parents preoccupied children at every age during the time of separation. With the young children, this feeling often manifested in their play, while older children tried sometimes directly to bring about or force a reconciliation.

The children in this study reacted to their parents' divorce by worrying about one or both of their parents. They worried about their parents' emotional stability and ability to manage without the help of the other parent. They worried about the health and well-being of the remaining parent. Wallerstein and Kelly found that over half of the children they studied suffered from feelings of rejection by one or both of their parents. They viewed their parents' departure from the home as a decrease in interest in them. The parents' preoccupation with their own problems, partial withdrawal of interest in their children and interruption in their care were perceived as further rejection. The children's sense of rejection often led them to feelings of unworthiness and unlovableness. They found that six-to-twelve-year-old boys as a

group felt most rejected by their fathers, regardless of their psychological condition.

As a result of the divorce, the children in this study felt lonely. This was due to the changing roles of the parents in the child's life. Children often felt conflicted regarding their loyalties to their parents. They felt pulled in both directions. Sometimes the parents aggravated this feeling because they competed for their children's love and allegiance openly.

Finally, children and adolescents of all ages demonstrated a rise in anger and aggression. Temper tantrums increased in the younger children, as did hitting of other children and siblings. Older children and adolescents expressed anger more directly. Anger ranged from explosiveness directed at the parents to general crankiness and rebelliousness.

While the concerns of younger children and adolescents are similar, their reactions differ. Typically, the younger school-aged children (six to nine years old) are seen as sad, suffering emotional pain, fearful and guilty about the marital breakup. The nine-to-twelve-year-olds often display more shock, surprise and intense anger. On the other hand, adolescents express surprise but are not particularly shocked at the decision, although they feel loss and pain intensely. Many become angry or hostile about what they perceived had been done to them. In some instances, this is manifested in acting-out behaviors (Freemen and Couchman, 1985). Sexual promiscuity, delinquency, the use of drugs and alcohol, and

aggressive behavior have all been identified as adolescent reactions to divorce (Beekman, 1986).

One explanation for the different responses attached to age is the effect the divorce has on the normal developmental processes. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) describe the common theme in adolescents' response to divorce is the fact that they experience their parents "as leaving them in lieu of their own adolescent leave-taking of their parents and the parental home" (p. 81).

Adolescence has been characterized as the period when youngsters begin their search for identity and independence (Erikson, 1968). The typical behavior pattern is the taking of steps toward maturity and independence, followed by a retreat to more childish behavior and dependence. Within an intact family, this process of psychological disengagement takes place gradually over several years. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) state:

> Yet precisely because the adolescent characteristically seesaws back and forth over several years between safety of the family home base and the exciting but still chancy world of his or her contemporaries, the need for a stable family structure is very great. An important purpose of family during these adolescent years is to provide the youngster with the opportunity to return to base, replenish emotional supplies that have been depleted, to restore battered self-esteem, to regress briefly, to retreat temporarily, and finally to gather courage for the next venture into independence. The toppling of the family structure at this time burdens these normal developmental processes and threatens to derail them (p. 82).

Early adolescents have certain qualities that make them especially vulnerable. Emotionally they are very sensitive,

lack self-esteem, and believe that personal problems are unique to themselves. Socially, they may be rebellious toward parents but are still strongly dependent on parental values and need frequent affirmation from significant adults (Schools in the Middle, 1988).

It is difficult to predict the long-term effects of divorce on children and adolescents because the consequences of their long-term adjustment are influenced by many psychological and situational variables. Research in this area is scarce; however, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) conducted a five-year follow-up study of the 131 families they originally interviewed. They found that five years following the divorce the effects ranged from:

- -Thirty-four percent of the children and youth having residual feelings of loneliness and sadness regarding the divorce that did not affect their overall adjustment.
- -Twenty-nine percent having grade-level learning, appropriate school and social adjustment, but significant residues of anger, emotional neediness, unhappiness and diminished self-esteem.
- -Thirty-three percent feeling intensely unhappy and depressed with incidences of sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, stealing, poor learning, intense anger, apathy and restlessness.

Given both the short-term and potential long-term effect of divorce, it seems appropriate for those working with adolescents to develop programs which will support them through this difficult period.

Research has indicated that group programs can be an effective method for working with adolescents. Often they will

discuss their problems more openly in groups of their peers than in individual counseling. They benefit from sharing their feelings and experiences with others in similar situations (Ohlsen, 1977). Groups for children and adolescents of divorced parents have been found to be helpful in improving the participant's attitudes toward divorce, improving classroom behavior, increasing levels of self-esteem and helping them to feel more in control of their lives (Cantrell, 1986; Omizo and Omizo, 1988; Anderson, Kinney and Gerley, 1984). Sheridan, Baker and de Lissovoy (1984) found that seventh, eighth and ninth grade youth participating in structured groups for youth in changing families had positive attitudes regarding their experience in the groups.

According to Cantrell (1986), counselors can work with parents to increase their awareness of their children's needs and feelings concerning the divorce. They can also provide teachers with information regarding children's responses to divorce which will assist them in helping students to cope. Although this author believes that these are important components to a program geared to assist adolescents in changing families, the focus of this paper is to develop a structured group program for adolescents in the school setting.

STRUCTURED GROUP PROGRAM MODEL

This portion of the paper presents a short-term, structured group program for adolescents who are experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents. It is structured in that activities are planned for the beginning of each session that help facilitate group interaction and discussion as adolescents have a great need to share and compare experiences with their peers. It is designed for the school setting and to be led by a school guidance counselor. The goals of the group are to:

1. Clarify the participants' feelings toward divorce.
2. Help the group members understand that others have similar feelings and concerns.
3. Assist the participants in gaining an accurate awareness of the divorce situation.
4. Aid group members in coping with their feelings.
5. To facilitate the participants' support of each other and sharing of their feelings.
6. To help the group members feel good about themselves through self-disclosure, peer support and the group leader's empathic understanding.

The number of participants for the group should be no more than eight, so that they each have ample opportunity to talk. Students recently experiencing the parental separation/ divorce would be encouraged to participate. Those expressing

a desire to be in the group would meet individually with the school counselor. The aim of this meeting would be to describe the purpose of the group and to describe the kinds of activities in which the members would be involved. This would give potential members the opportunity to decide if they were still interested and would also give the group leader the chance to learn about the individual's situation. When the membership of the group was established, a letter explaining the structure, purpose and goals of the group would be sent to parents, notifying them of their child's interest and requesting their permission.

The program would consist of ten to twelve 45-minute sessions conducted on a weekly basis. Each session would have a particular focus, although latitude would be given depending upon the needs of the group during each meeting.

Session #1

The first session would focus on getting acquainted and establishing the ground rules for the group. After reiterating the purpose of the group, the leader would ask the members to form pairs and interview each other to determine likes, dislikes, hobbies and family members. The partners would then take turns introducing each other to the group. A discussion of the ground rules for the group would follow.

Session #2

During the next session, the group leader would ask the members to draw pictures of their families doing something

together. Volunteers would be asked to discuss their pictures with the group. The leader would help facilitate the discussion by asking the members questions such as:

Whom do you feel is in your family?
Which family members do you live with?
Which family members do not live with you?
What is special about each family member?

Session #3

At the beginning of this session, the leader would introduce the book How It Feels When Parents Divorce (Krementz, 1984). This book contains stories written by 19 children and adolescents, ages seven to sixteen, about their separation/divorce experience. The leader would ask for volunteers to choose stories written by children their age and read them to the group. After the readings, the leader would ask the members if they had similar experiences or feelings as the children in the stories. After the discussion, the leader would point out that all of the stories are different and that everyone in the group has a unique story to tell as well. The members would be given the option of writing their own stories about their divorce experience (not to be written during group time). When finished, the stories would be put together in book form for the group. This would give the participants the opportunity to read the stories of others who may have had similar experiences. It might also be beneficial for the members to have their own story to refer to in order to help them be more cognizant of the ways in which their situation has changed, as well as how they have changed since their story

was first written.

Session #4

During this session, the leader would divide the group in half. The groups would be asked to write a group poem about how it feels to have their parents separated or divorced. At the end of the session, the groups would be asked to share their poems with the entire group. These poems could be added to the book of stories if the members wished.

Session #5

Anger is a common feeling for children and adolescents experiencing the divorce or separation of their parents. The next session would focus on the ways the members express their anger. The leader would ask the group to discuss ways they express their angry feelings regarding the divorce. The leader would point out similarities and differences, and a discussion would follow regarding the consequences of the different manners of expression to themselves and others.

Session #6

During this session, the participants would be asked to brainstorm the problems associated with separation and divorce. Then the participants would be asked to discuss ways to cope with these problems. Next, they would be divided in groups and asked to role-play a situation of their choice.

Session #7

During this session, the members would continue to role-

play problems of separation/divorce and discuss them. It is possible that this activity would require additional sessions.

Session #8

As the divorce situation creates stress for the young people involved, it is important for them to understand that they can control how they react or respond to stress. During this session, the leader would ask the members to identify things they feel stressed about. Then a list would be generated regarding the methods by which members can take care of themselves and let off steam.

Session #9

Because the separation/divorce process is painful for most adolescents, there is a tendency for them to focus on the negative aspects. During this session, the leader would pass out a worksheet that would ask them to list the five most difficult aspects of their experience and the positive things that have come out of the situation. The members would be asked to discuss their lists with the group.

Session #10

The purpose of this final session is to facilitate the giving of positive comments to the group members and to evaluate the group. Each member would be asked to sit in the center of the group, and the members would take turns sharing positive things about each person. The members would then be asked to evaluate the group by responding to the following

incomplete sentences:

1. One thing I liked about the group is.....
2. One thing I disliked about the group is.....
3. One or two thing(s) I learned is (are).....
4. If I could change anything about the group, it would be..... (Cantrell, 1986)

After writing their responses, the members would be given the opportunity to discuss them. Evaluations would be collected by the group leader and be used to plan future programs.

CONCLUSION

Parental divorce and separation have been identified as significant crisis events for children and adolescents. The effects and potential long-term consequences of the experience on children and youth have been identified. Especially for adolescents, developmental tasks become harder to accomplish when a family structure is disrupted and unable to meet their developmental needs. Although separating and divorcing parents seek assistance for themselves, most children and adolescents in divorce situations do not receive outside assistance and often face their problems alone. The school is the most logical place for children from changing families to receive services. Group counseling programs can help to ease the adjustment of adolescents who are experiencing this stressful life transition.

REFERENCES

Beekman, N. (1986). Helping children cope with divorce: the school counselor's role. (Highlights: An Eric Caps Digest). Ann Arbor, MI: Counseling and Personnel Services.

Cantrell, R. G. (1986). Adjustment to divorce: three components to assist children. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 20, 163-173.

Drake, E. (1979). Helping the school cope with children of divorce. Journal of Divorce. Fall, 69-75.

Erikson, E. (1969). Identity Youth and Crisis. New York: W. W. Norton.

Franke, L. B. (1983). Growing Up Divorced. New York: Linden Press.

Freemen, R., and Couchman, B. (1985). Coping with family change: a model for therapeutic group counseling with children and adolescents. The School Guidance Worker, 40, 44-50.

Garvin, J. (1984). Children of divorce -- a challenge for middle school teachers. Middle School Journal, 16, 6-7.

Graver, C., and Morse, L. (1986). Helping Children of Divorce. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Limited.

Krementz, J. (1984). How It Feels When Parents Divorce. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Kurdek, L. A. (1983). Children and Divorce. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Limited.

Moore, N. E., and Sumner, M. G. (1985). Support group for children of divorce: a family life enrichment group model. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Social Workers, New Orleans, LA.

Ohlsen, M. (1977). Group Counseling. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Omizo, M. M., and Omizo, S. A. (1987). Group counseling with children of divorce: new findings. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 22, 46-51.

Omizo, M. M., and Omizo, S. A. (1988). The effects of participation in group counseling sessions on self-esteem and locus of control among adolescents with divorced parents. The School Counselor, 36, 54-60.

Parish, T. S., and Dostal, J. W. (1980). Evaluations of self and parent figures by children from intact and divorced families: can they be affected in school setting? Education, 103, 60-63.

Parish, T. S., and Taylor, J. C. (1974). The impact of divorce and subsequent father absence on children's and adolescents' self-concepts. Journal of Youth and Adolescents, 8, 427-433.

Rasche, H. J., and Rasche, V. J. (1979). Family conflict and children's self-concepts: a comparison of intact and single-parent families. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41, 367-374.

Schools in the Middle: The Report of the Middle Level Task Force (1988). Augusta, ME: Maine Department of Educational and Cultural Services.

Sheridon, J. T., Baker, S. B., and de Lissovoy, V. (1984). Structured group counseling and bibliotherapy as in-school strategies for preventing problems in youth of changing families. The School Counselor, 32, 134-141.

Snyder, K. A. (1985). An intervention program for children of separated or divorced parents. Techniques, 1, 286-296.

Wallerstein, J. S., and Kelly, J. B. (1980). Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce. New York: Basic Books.